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# What About School-Age Marriages?

"School-age" marriages are increasing in Iowa, following a trend toward younger marriages which began about 1900 in America. Whether you feel that this is "good" or "bad," here are some facts about the situation.



by Lee G. Burchinal and Loren Chancellor

**Y**OUR high school son, 18, has decided he has met the "one and only" girl and wants to marry her. Or, your daughter, 16, announces she has met the "one person" for her and wishes to establish a home of her own.

If you think the question of high-school-age marriage is unique to your family or community, you're wrong. A study of marriage ages in Iowa and the United States throws some light on this situation and raises some interesting questions.

The trend toward younger marriage has been a consistent part of the American marriage pattern since the turn of the century. Then, the median age for men at marriage was about 26. In 1950 it was 23. For brides the comparable ages were 22 in 1900, 20 in 1950. In Iowa the 1950 ages averaged from one-third to a half year older than the national figures. The most recent available figures for Iowa indicate that the age level is dropping further. In 1956 the median age for grooms in the state was 22½; for brides 19½.

But a unique feature of this earlier marriage trend is a recent increase in high-school-age marriages. In 1940, for example, only about 1 percent of the men and 16 percent of the women married in Iowa were 18 years of age or less. By 1956 these figures had increased to 7 percent for men and 28 percent for women.

## Why This Increase?

Why has this striking increase in youthful marriages come about? We don't have complete enough information to give an exact answer. But clues from many marriage studies suggest some of the conditions which probably have a bearing:

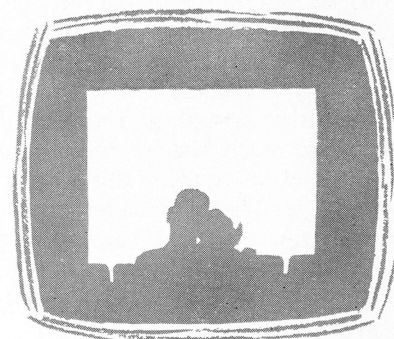
- We've been living in a period of general prosperity. Jobs have been reasonably plentiful. Wives can and do supplement their husbands' income. Health and other insurance plans help cover baby costs and other unexpected expenses. By and large, prevailing economic conditions have provided a basis for a young couple to make a financial go of married life.

- War periods generally tend to lower the age of marriage. This was true for both world wars and the Korean conflict. And even though we're not now engaged in actual war, we're hardly living in a

full state of peace. Young men are still going into the armed forces, and young couples are still faced with the question of whether to marry first or wait. Many of the war-type conditions which encourage younger and/or less deliberately considered marriages are still with us.

- Our society has become less rural and more urban. We've given increasing freedom to young people to choose whom they date, where they go and what they do. Direct parental and community supervision has declined. Thus, there's less to prevent young couples from marrying if they decide it's the thing they want to do.

- Our mass media—television, radio, magazines, newspapers, movies—have tended to idealize marriage. In many cases marriage has been portrayed as unrealistically attractive to young people. At the same time, the use of sex appeals in advertising and the intense physical



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expression of love in our movies, television and magazines has undoubtedly given added stimulation to adolescent sex drives. In part, the natural consequence of these pressures is increased desire to marry at a younger age.

● Adolescents are very conscious of their "fringe-area" status between that of children and adults. Marriage confers adult status and may remove much of the uncertainty that adolescents feel concerning their roles in the community.

● Adolescents are also very conscious of being like others in their groups. Marriage may become "the thing to do." Other couples get married and appear to get along reasonably well. This confers high status to the married teenager and may tend to produce a chain reaction of teenage marriages.

● For some adolescents, marriage represents a means of escape from unhappy homes, from unsatisfactory school experiences or from communities which young people don't like and want to leave. Also, teenagers are dating younger, "going steady" earlier and more frequently. This leads to earlier serious relationships and, in an increasing number of cases, marriage.

## What Can We Say?

Information from marriage certificates makes it possible to discuss some of the characteristics of high-school-age marriages. This information includes age differences between young brides and grooms, some of the differences in characteristics of rural and urban married couples and the relationship between religious backgrounds and youthful marriage. More meaningful information on the "why's" will be forthcoming from more inten-

sive studies now under way. But here are the comparisons and differences apparent from the marriage certificate information:

**Bride, Groom Differences:** In 1956 the difference in age between all brides and grooms was about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years. But the difference between high-school-age brides and their husbands was almost  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years. In fact, as the bride's age decreased, the difference between her age and that of her husband increased. For 18-year-old brides, for instance, the groom-bride age difference was 3.1 years; for 16-year-old brides and their husbands, 4 years; for 14-year-old brides and their husbands, 5 years. The high-school-age girls who marry apparently aren't marrying their high school classmates. They're marrying older youths who have either left school or have graduated from school.

**Rural, Urban Differences:** Are youthful marriages more characteristic of rural or urban communities? We can give a partial answer to this question by comparing the percentages of brides who live in rural and urban communities with the percentages of girls 14-18 living in those areas. About 46 percent of the youthful brides came from rural areas, but an estimated 58 percent of all of the girls 14-18 years of age are rural inhabitants. An estimated 42 percent of the girls of this age live in urban communities, and 54 percent of the younger brides were city dwellers. So it appears that youthful marriages in Iowa are slightly more characteristic of urban areas.

One reason is probably that cities offer greater economic support for youthful marriages. It's generally true that new social customs originate mostly in cities and spread to rural areas. If younger age at marriage represents the emergence of a new social custom in the United States, we can expect the trend to be more pronounced in urban than in rural areas. This may also partially explain why ages at marriage in Iowa lag slightly behind the national figures.

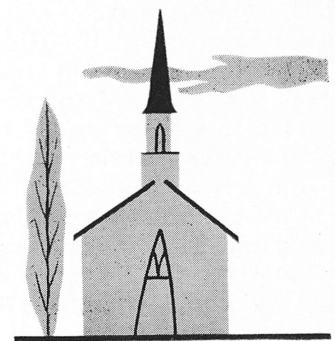
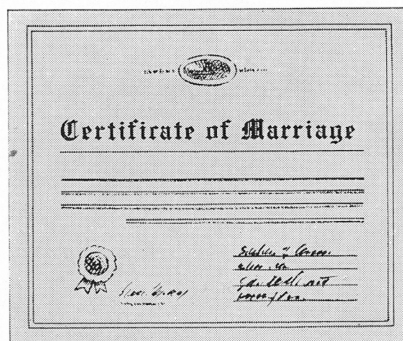
**Local Couples?** County of residence was the only information available for estimating nearness of



brides' and grooms' residences. We found that 88 percent of the urban brides married men who lived in the same county as they did. This was true of only 66 percent of the rural brides. So it appears that young urban brides are more likely to marry "a boy down the block" while the young rural bride is more likely than urban girls to marry "a boy from the next county."

Why would this be so? There may be several reasons. For American young people, dating and courtship consist of a series of largely unsupervised activities. In urban areas girls generally have a larger number of boys from which to choose dating partners—either among their schoolmates or from another high school. Girls in rural areas have fewer boys from which to choose. And, if they date boys from another school, the boy will probably live a considerable distance from the girl's home. In many cases, he will live in another county. The fact that a girl's parents may not know the boy or his family isn't a serious obstacle to dating and later courtship.

**Home-Town Weddings:** Many people think of school-age marriages as elopements. But the facts show that this is not true for the most part. About 73 percent of the youthful marriages occurred in the





county in which the bride lived; 8 percent occurred in the county where the groom lived. Only 19 percent took place in a county where neither the bride nor groom lived. Further evidence of the conventional nature of these youthful marriages is that approximately 92 percent were performed by a clergyman. For all marriages in the state in 1956, this figure was 88 percent.

We found no substantial rural-urban differences with regard either to the percent of brides marrying in their own counties or to the frequency of church weddings.

### Cross-Religious Marriages:

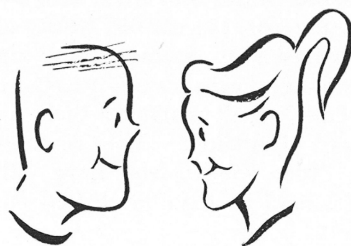
America has been called a melting pot of persons with different national and religious backgrounds. But marriage has tended to occur largely among persons with the same religious background. Some recent studies, however, have shown a change toward a greater number of cross-religious marriages. These are mainly marriages between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the United States. Our marriage data for 1956 shows this trend in Iowa, too.

The percentage of younger brides who married a man with the same religious beliefs as themselves was smaller than that for Iowa marriages involving brides 19 years of age and older. The largest difference between these two groups involved the percentage of Catholic women marrying Catholic men. For the older group, 81 percent of the Catholic brides married a Catholic; for the younger group, the figure dropped to 61 percent. A smaller, but corresponding, percentage difference occurred for Protestant brides marrying Catholics. About 5 percent of the older Protestant brides married Catholics; for the younger group of Protestant brides, 6½ percent.

What are some of the reasons behind the increase in cross-religious marriages? Especially among younger couples? Marriage for Americans is a highly valued relationship—defined principally in terms of personal happiness. Our dating and courtship system is based on the premise that the young persons involved are the ones who should decide with whom they'll be most happy. In effect, we tell our

young people to marry on the basis of love.

To the extent that we do this, we should expect the personal factors such as personality, charm, looks, sex appeal, etc. to be more important in a choice of a marriage partner than the church to which the prospective bride or groom belongs. Intensely romantic views of love are probably strongest during the late adolescent years. We might expect, therefore, to find that differences in religious or family backgrounds are less important for younger couples than older ones.



Teenagers are more likely than older couples to marry under the "glow" of romantic love, with less consideration of other factors. Only later do they discover the necessity of having to resolve major and minor differences of opinion. Then their husband-wife relationship comes in for a real test.

### What Guidance?

The facts we have indicate that high-school-age marriage is a fairly widespread practice—that these marriages are not elopements but reflect, for the most part, the conventional characteristics of older marriages. Parents, teachers, ministers, youth leaders and youth themselves are having to cope with problems of younger marriages. What can be done?

First we must recognize that the chances are increasing that young persons in their teens, perhaps still in school, will be married. Some parents accept this possibility and help the young persons with the problems involved. They recognize that threats against the young man or woman at this stage may only drive the couple into a marriage. These parents listen to the problems of older children, discuss these with them and offer counsel. They trust that the young persons can and will,

by themselves, make honest decisions. They believe that the chances are good that, if the parents have earnestly tried to help their children become individuals who can make logical decisions, the children will reflect their parents' trust in what they do.

Accepting the fact of increasing numbers of youthful marriages, parents have more need to acquaint their children with the realities of married life: letting older children help with the budgeting of family income for food, housing or farm expenses; making sure that the children are aware of realistic types of problems—that marriage based on love alone does not necessarily insure a successful marriage.

Community action can be helpful, too. Churches are helping young people appreciate the values, obligations and responsibilities of marriage. But even more could be done to deal with problems of dating and courtship and how these relate to marriage based on ideas of respect and devotion to each other. Schools may need to devote more time to teaching and discussing parent-adolescent relationships along with dating, courtship and early marriage adjustments.

Schools which do offer guidance in this area often do so at the junior or senior level. But the statistics indicate that this instruction may come too late for many boys and girls.

We've long helped our young people acquire the skills for their life careers—assuming, perhaps, that they're "just naturally" ready for a satisfactory marriage. Yet our young people themselves are indicating that this is one of the kinds of direction they want. Faced with the fact that school-age marriages are increasing, are we letting our young folks down?

